



## Between ages 9 and 13, screens can wait

This document compiles 10 evidence-based recommendations drawn from recent scientific research and public health guidelines, aimed at promoting safe digital environments and protecting the mental health of preteens between 9 and 13 years old. We recommend adapting these guidelines to each family's specific context.

### DC DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP — Building autonomy

#### 1 Hold firm to established rules

In preadolescence, social pressure toward devices and platforms increases. Holding firm to rules relieves them of the burden of deciding or explaining. Involving them in rule-setting fosters progressive responsibility.

#### 2 Encourage real-world autonomy

Assigning household responsibilities, independent mobility, and real phone calls helps them develop self-confidence and the ability to solve problems and interact socially.

#### 3 Educate about persuasive design

Explain that platforms optimize their design to capture attention. Notifications, infinite scrolling, and AI algorithms function as hooks that prevent free decision-making.

### DW DIGITAL WELL-BEING — Physical and mental health

#### 4 Limit screens to a maximum of 1 hour per day

When digital leisure exceeds one hour, it displaces fundamental habits for mental health and the brain reconfiguration that takes place during puberty. Include study and homework time.

#### 5 Remove screens from bedrooms

Without supervision, screens facilitate access to inappropriate content and risky behaviors. Establish a screen "parking lot" outside bedrooms 1 hour before bedtime.

#### 6 Protect sleep quality

Blue light blocks melatonin and dopamine from social media keeps the brain alert. Avoid screens 60 minutes before bedtime. Ages 9 to 13: 8 to 10 hours of sleep per night.

### NN THE NON-NEGOTIABLES — Protection and safety

#### 7 Support smartphone restrictions in the classroom

Restricting phones at school promotes face-to-face interactions. Without complementary family rules, children will compensate at home. Implement rules, limits, and screen-free zones.

#### 8 Don't give in to "everyone has one"

Giving in only fuels a collective action problem. If five families agree to wait, their children will have their own group. Delaying is not punishment—it's protection.

#### 9 Install parental controls

Parental monitoring significantly reduces rates of depression and anxiety. Use native tools (Apple, Microsoft, Google) or Qustodio to filter content and control screen time.

#### 10 Delay smartphones and social media until age 16

Between ages 9 and 13, the brain goes through a window of high sensitivity where screens negatively impact life satisfaction. If communication is needed, choose basic phones.

## How to handle peer pressure?

The phrase "I'm the only one without a smartphone!" is the biggest pressure parents face. These strategies work:

### Talk to other parents

Before granting access to a social network or game, ask in the parent chat: "Have you allowed it yet?" This opens the conversation and you'll discover that most share the same doubt and are waiting for someone to take the lead.

### Create group agreements

Research recommends waiting until age 16. By agreeing to wait as a group, the stigma of "being the odd one out without a smartphone" breaks and peer pressure is deactivated.

### Be consistent with school rules

Aligning home rules with school rules (screen-free sleepovers, smartphone stations at the door during visits) reduces confusion and creates spaces for real interaction.

2x

higher risk of depression in preteens with their own smartphone

— Longitudinal child mental health study

**Note:** The recommendations presented here are informational and intended to guide digital well-being. They do not replace personalized professional advice. Each family should adapt these guidelines to their own context and needs. Prepared by Viviana Quintero as part of a consultancy for UNCOLI.